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Latvia's 'Russian left': trapped between ethnic, socialist, and social-democratic identities

Ammon Cheskin and Luke March

Following the 2008 economic crisis, Latvia suffered the worst loss of output *in the world*, with GDP collapsing 25 percent.¹ Yet Latvia's radical left has shown no notable ideological or strategic response. Existing RLPs did not secure significant political gains from the crisis, nor have new challengers benefitted. Indeed, Latvia has been heralded as a 'poster child' for austerity as the right has continued to dominate government policy.²

This chapter explores this puzzle. Although the economic crisis was economically destructive, we argue that the political responses have been consistently ethnicised in Latvia. Additionally, the Latvian left has been equally challenged intellectually and strategically by the ethnically-framed Ukrainian crisis of 2014.

Special attention is given to the Latvian Socialist Party (*Latvijas Sociālistiskā partija*, LSP), Latvia's most prominent (albeit small) RLP. We argue that one of the principal reasons for the LSP's inability to exploit the crisis is its strategic inertness and stubborn adherence to the ideological tenets of Marxism-Leninism. Second is its preference for sheltering within a wider electoral alliance of 'Russian' centre-left parties.

The 'Russianness' of the LSP and the Latvian centre-left has its primary explanation in Latvia's Soviet legacies, entailing the admixture of socialism with Russification promoted by the 'colonial' USSR. In truth, these legacies remain live because they have been utilised by political entrepreneurs

who have conflated appeals based on socialism and ethnicity. This has complicated the efforts of centre-left and radical left parties, who have largely been unable (and indeed, often unwilling) to shake off popular associations with communism, the Soviet past, and their ‘Russianness.’

Precisely because Latvia’s political spectrum can be characterised in terms of ethnic, rather than ideological, cleavages, the responses of the country’s radical left have been heavily constrained by ethnic considerations that are peculiar to Latvia’s post-Soviet political environment (although with some similarities in Estonia).³ The conflation of ethnic and ideological ‘leftness’ explains the ultimate failure of RLPs to gain wider political and social traction in Latvia. Crucially, it has almost entirely prevented the country’s extant radical left from moving beyond its communist roots and articulating an anti-austerity message that could transcend ethnic cleavages.

This chapter illustrates these peculiarities by focusing also on the wider Latvian left. Because the LSP’s political fortunes are deeply contingent on the resonance of its Soviet aesthetics and its appeal to the Russian-speaking electorate, it is impossible to ignore the wider (‘Russian’) context within which it operates.

Accordingly, we show how the positions of the Social Democratic Party ‘Harmony’ (*Sociāldemokrātiskā Partija ‘Saskaņa’*), the LSP’s most regular coalition partner, and since 2011 the largest represented party in the Latvian parliament, impacted upon its response to the economic crisis. The third main ‘Russian left’ party we examine is For Human Rights in United Latvia (*Par cilvēka tiesībām vienotā Latvijā*, PCTVL), which has latterly developed from a declaratively left-wing, socially-oriented party to the ethnicised, radical-right Latvian Russian Union (*Latvijas Krievu savienība*, LKS). In 2002, PCTVL was Latvia’s second-largest parliamentary party. However, it failed to gain any seats in the 2010, 2011 and 2014 parliamentary elections.⁴

Latvia and the Economic Crisis

For Latvia, the economic crisis represents classic ‘boom and bust.’ Real, year-on-year GDP percentage growth had been in double digits for the three years preceding the crisis.⁵ From late 2007, however, there followed over two years

of economic recession; a 70 percent collapse in housing prices and rise in unemployment to 20.7 percent compounded the plummeting GDP.⁶

One of the most striking aspects of the Latvian case is that, despite such economic hardships, the right-wing governing coalition (at times a numerical minority within the Latvian parliament [*Saeima*]), was able to push through extensive austerity measures with only one brief period of public, social opposition. The austerity measures focused on so-called ‘internal devaluation’⁷: public-sector wages were cut 35 percent, 14,000 public sector workers lost their jobs, 29 of a total 49 hospitals were closed, and pensions were cut by 10 percent.⁸ At the same time, the national currency (the Lat) was pegged to the Euro, preventing purposeful currency depreciation and eventually helping Latvia join the eurozone in 2014.

Public anger at government handling of the crisis peaked on 13 January 2009, when approximately 10,000 people took to Riga’s streets, demanding the dissolution of Parliament. The protests culminated in violence as nearby shops and vehicles were attacked and protesters tried (unsuccessfully) to force their way into Parliament. The protests had been called for by opposition parties and trade unions and fuelled speculation that Latvian society was moving away from its traditional post-Soviet passivity towards a more radicalised ‘Greek’ protest model.⁹

Although this appeared a fertile context for exploitation by radical left groups, the protests soon diminished, especially after Prime Minister Ivars Godmanis resigned and Valdis Dombrovskis (of the centre-right New Era party) was appointed to head a re-jigged coalition in March 2009. Thereafter, notwithstanding small-scale, sporadic protests, the Latvian public faced the ensuing austerity drive stoically. Soon after economic recovery began in early 2010, Prime Minister Dombrovskis, who had overseen many of the harsh reforms, co-authored a book proclaiming the exemplary nature of the reform outcomes: ‘social unrest was minimal, and extremism nearly absent... traditional populism lost out and ethnic tensions were reduced’.¹⁰

Certainly, the radical left did not benefit electorally from the economic crisis. Whereas the centre-left ‘Harmony Centre’ coalition (in which the LSP participates) did dramatically increase its votes in the 2010 and 2011 *Saeima* elections, Latvian voters explicitly backed right-wing incumbent governments.

Unexpectedly, Dombrovskis' Unity coalition received the greatest number of seats (33 of 100) in 2010, and despite repeated coalition turnover thereafter (common to Latvian politics), Unity returned to office in 2011 and 2014. Conversely, the LSP's vote and seat share remained stagnant throughout the crisis, even losing one of four seats in 2010 (see Table 11.1). We now explore the different, but ultimately unsuccessful strategies of the main parties of the Russian left.

Table 1: Representation of the Latvian Socialist Party in parliament,

1996-2014

Parliamentary election	LSP seats	Total number of fraction seats	Party list
1995 (6 th Saeima)	5	5	Socialist Party of Latvia
1998 (7 th Saeima)	4	16	National Harmony Party (For Human Rights in a United Latvia fraction)
2002 (8 th Saeima)	5	25	For Human Rights in a United Latvia
2006 (9 th Saeima)	4	17	Harmony Centre
2010 (10 th Saeima)	3	29	Harmony Centre
2011 (11 th Saeima)	3	31	Harmony Centre
2014 (12 th Saeima)	3	24	Social Democratic Party 'Harmony'

Latvia's 'Russian Left'

Latvia's demographic situation has significantly shaped the development of RLPs in Latvia. In 1989, ethnic Latvians made up just 52 percent of the country's population, while Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians (mostly Russian-speaking) comprised 42 percent.¹¹ The bulk of these Russophones were Soviet-era migrants, provoking calls for the 'de-Russification' and 'decolonisation' of Latvia following independence in 1991.¹² Accordingly, the majority of Russophones were initially denied Latvian citizenship and only in

1998 were the majority of non-citizens allowed to apply for naturalisation. To this day, a significant proportion (37 percent) of Russian speakers do not hold Latvian citizenship and are not eligible to vote.¹³ This means that the Russian-speaking vote represents roughly 20 percent of today's population.

Jānis Ikstens notes that, as a consequence of Latvia's demographic peculiarities, the party system has largely been determined by two cleavages – ethnic and socio-economic.¹⁴ Latvia's political spectrum traverses left to right, but often conflates socio-economic positions with ethnic ones.¹⁵ In many respects, this is due to 'a tendency for "Latvian" parties to adopt right-of-centre positions on economic issues, with the "Slavic" parties leaning towards leftist solutions in economic policy'. Consequently, while relatively weak urban-rural and liberal-conservative cleavages are observable, 'the ethnic cleavage has remained the major division shaping the Latvian party system.'¹⁶

Notwithstanding the ethnic divides in Latvian society, the ethnicisation of economic orientations is particularly striking when considering high levels of support for leftist social ideals in Latvia. Several surveys have pointed to leftist social preferences not only among Russian speakers, but also many ethnic Latvians.¹⁷ In this respect, Latvia seems little different from other post-communist countries where a paternalistic, egalitarian 'socialist value culture' underpinned strong left-wing parties.¹⁸ However, the post-Soviet Latvian electorate has never elected a left-leaning government. The major explanation for this discrepancy must be that the political expression of even the social-democratic 'left' is tied discursively to concepts associated with the Soviet past and, by extension, to Russianness. An overview of the parties of the 'Russian left' helps to illustrate this point.

As well as being a minority, the Russian-speaking electorate is ideologically divided, with three principal tendencies: nostalgic 'Soviet internationalists', 'Great Russia' imperialists and supporters of multiethnicity.¹⁹ Such ideological divisions underpin today's Latvian Socialist Party, Latvian Russian Unity and Harmony respectively, and explain why their coalitions have often been fractious.

The LSP has been Latvia's most prominent RLP since its formation in 1994. It partially represents a 'communist successor party': although it does not claim direct continuity with the (former ruling) Latvian Communist Party,

this is political expediency: the KPL was banned in 1991. Latvian legislation still prohibits communist symbols and prevents KPL members after 13 January 1991 running for national office.

Indeed, continuity with the communist past is clearly apparent in both ideology and personnel. The LSP is a Marxist party, holding steadfast to Soviet shibboleths such as democratic centralism, class struggle, imperialism and proletarian internationalism. It remains rooted to theories of dialectical and historical materialism.²⁰ In comparative terms, the party is a nostalgic ‘conservative communist’ party, evidenced by membership of the International Meetings and INITIATIVE of Communist and Workers’ Parties headed by the Greek Communist Party. Indicatively, the LSP’s leader from 1999 until retirement in 2015 was Alfrēds Rubiks, last head of the KPL, who was imprisoned from 1995-7 for conspiring to overthrow the new Latvian government while supporting the August 1991 Soviet coup against Mikhail Gorbachev.

Some successor parties have benefited at elections from pointing to their ‘usable past’, i.e a history of governing competence or independent decision-making in the Soviet era.²¹ But the LSP has little usable to offer: notwithstanding its internationalism, its arch-conservatism is buttressed by a strong link with *Russianness*. Whereas successor parties in Russia, Ukraine and Moldova have been able to utilise (some) positive associations with the Soviet developmental model, in the Baltic states many simply associate this model with Russian colonialism.²² After all, only roughly one-third of KPL membership was ethnically Latvian, making it the least ‘national’ Soviet communist party, and one perceived as a ‘foreign’ entity.²³

Little wonder then, that from 1995 onwards the LSP has occupied a niche position, with three to five deputies (of 100) in the Latvian *Saeima* (Table 11.1). Additionally, the party obtained one seat in the 2009 European Parliament elections (taken up by Rubiks, because of his ban on standing in domestic elections). Given the *Saeima*’s five-percent threshold, these modest results forced the party to canvass within a number of wider left and centre-left alliances (see Table 11.1) since the run-up to the 1998 *Saeima* elections.

As a result, it is impossible to understand the development of the Latvian radical left without also understanding the challenges and opportunities

afforded to the broader left in Latvia. The LSP contested the 1998 elections under the People's Harmony Party list and soon afterwards both parties joined the coalition For Human Rights in United Latvia (PCTVL).

In 2003, both the LSP and the People's Harmony Party left the PCTVL coalition following acrimonious disputes about its strategic direction. The People's Harmony Party then created Harmony Centre (*Saskaņas Centrs* SC) which in 2006 displaced PCTVL as the most represented 'Russian' alliance in Latvian politics, taking most of its 2002 vote. SC united a number of centre-left parties with the more radical LSP. In 2010 the centre-left parties within the alliance merged to form The Social Democratic Party 'Harmony' (SDPS). SC therefore represented a notable shift towards the centre-left. In its 2005 programme, the LSP justified its participation within SC by noting that it was forced to cooperate 'under the conditions of bourgeois dictatorship', while all the time maintaining that transition from capitalism to socialism was inevitable.²⁴

In 2014, Harmony Centre was officially dissolved and LSP and Harmony contested the 2014 elections to the European Parliament separately. After a poor showing in these elections (LSP lost their single seat while SDPS only obtained one European mandate), Harmony allocated LSP three seats from its party list in the 2014 *Saeima* elections, despite previously hinting that it might sever ties completely. Continued cooperation is therefore a marriage of convenience rather than an ideological alliance, with both parties sensing that their electoral success is maximised through collaboration. Nevertheless, collaboration remains problematic: the LSP's obvious continuity with its Soviet predecessor sullies Harmony's increasing aspirations to be coalitionable and reinforces the unofficial *cordon sanitaire* against the 'Russian parties' in Latvian national politics.

At the same time, 'Latvian' left-leaning parties (i.e. parties whose electorates are comprised of significant ethnic Latvians) have long been unable to garner substantial electoral support. Significantly, 1998 was the last time any such 'Latvian' party gained *Saeima* representation. The Social Democratic Workers' Party (LSDSP) (a merger of the former ex-Menshevik party influential in Latvia's interwar republic and the pro-independence split from the KPL) obtained 14 seats in 1998 but failed to return a single deputy in 2002.

The LSDSP has tried to distance itself from the communist past. It sets out a centre-left but anti-austerity programme and supports Latvia's EU membership (unlike the LSP) and NATO membership (unlike the LSP and PCTVL).²⁵ But not even the predominance of ethnic Latvian members and Latvian-language literature has insulated it from association with Russianness. The very use of 'social' in the party name negatively ties the organisation to the Soviet past.²⁶ Indicatively, the principal catalyst for the party splitting disastrously in 2002 was its co-operation with PCTVL in the Riga municipality in 2001-5. Breaking the taboo on co-operation with 'Russian' organisations has caused lasting damage.²⁷ Indeed, as Stephen Bloom notes, after the demise of the LSDSP, 'ethnic Latvian voters with leftist political views must either cross the ethnic cleavage and vote for a Russian minority party, or waste their votes by voting for a smaller ethnic Latvian leftist party.'²⁸

The discursive association of PCTVL and the LSP with Russianness can therefore be attributed to a number of factors, not least the Soviet experience of communism. But even relatively moderate left-wing parties such as Harmony (which unlike PCTVL and the LSP originated in the independence movement) have been unable to shake the notion that they are exclusively Russian, precisely because they espouse leftist values and aims. At the same time, the majority of parties that wish to be seen as 'normal', 'Latvian' parties have often adopted right-wing policies in order to distance themselves from any association with Russianness and Russia.

Ethnic polarisation has therefore persisted in the context of Latvia's 'ethnic democracy' or 'militant democracy',²⁹ exemplified by the restrictive citizenship policy premised on the exclusion of 'Moscow's protégés'.³⁰ Initially, only citizens of the pre-Soviet Latvian Republic and their direct ancestors were eligible for Latvian citizenship. The majority of Russian-speakers in Latvia were Soviet-era immigrants, so were consequently automatically excluded from citizenship.

A major concern of left-wing parties in Latvia has, understandably, centred on these thorny issues of citizenship. The PCTVL and Harmony fractions have campaigned extensively for greater minority rights for Latvia's Slavic population, with focus on education, citizenship and language policies.³¹ Although the pursuit of equal rights is a cardinal aim of left-wing parties the

world over, in the Latvian context, this inevitably led to the impression that the left was fighting for the rights of the Russian population in opposition to the newly-acquired sovereignty of the Latvian Republic. For Ivars Ijabs the left's problem results from the centrality of nation-building to Latvia's democratic institutions. He notes that 'the initial exclusion of the Soviet-era immigrants from the Latvian *demos* was seen as a precondition for democracy, and a particular type of nation-building, centred on the ethnic Latvian nation, as a necessary limitation of democracy for the sake of democracy itself'.³² Consequently, traditionally left-wing concerns are often perceived as inherently threatening to Latvia's nation-building project *and* constitutional order.

Additionally, the 'Russian left' has struggled to avoid entanglement in Latvia's fraught memory politics. In 2010 Harmony Centre became the second largest party in Parliament. Following still greater success in the 2011 snap general election (emerging as the largest party), SC faced inclusion in a new government coalition for the first time.³³ To some extent, inclusion was controversial because of SC's leftist economic programme, which advocated increasing budget expenditure in contrast to the general consensus among 'Latvian' parties for prolonging internal devaluation. However, the central argument for excluding SC rested on the party's perceived pro-Sovietism. For example, in the daily newspaper *Diena* V. Liepiņš [Zatlers' Reform Party MP] did not rule out future cooperation with SC, but noted it was then impossible because 'he was not convinced of SC's ability to be loyal to the Latvian state...*"the fact of the matter is that they do not acknowledge the occupation. They think that it was a fateful event which occurred and they do not have a problem with that"*' (*Diena* 25.09.11 emphasis added).

Political Consequences of the Economic Crisis

This section shows how ethnic divisions in Latvian politics have shaped the response of political parties to the 2008 economic crisis. Indeed, the economic and social upheavals of the crisis have failed fundamentally to challenge the clear political boundaries between 'Russian/Slavic' and 'Latvian' political entrepreneurs. Instead, as this section documents, the economic crisis has politically reinforced these ethnic boundaries. As such, pan-national

intellectual and strategic engagement with economic issues is greatly constrained, which has made it difficult for the left to translate the crisis into political gains.

In particular, the left's intellectual responses to the crisis have been constrained by the need to retain core support among Russian speakers. Consequently, the LSP and other sections of the 'Russian' left have been reluctant to move beyond reliance on Soviet-era aesthetics. The radical left has largely continued to focus on the human and political rights of Latvia's non-citizens, the status of the Russian language in Latvia, and (especially for the LSP) the importance of the memory of Soviet victory in the Second World War. This has impeded the articulation of a coherent economic argument that could be consumed by a broader, non-ethnicised audience. At the same time, whereas Harmony has often tried to transcend such issues and to articulate a coherent, de-ethnicised alternative economic programme, it has been constantly forced to reemphasise its ethnic credentials or face losing support among its primary electorate.

Abrupt changes in macro-economic conditions have been found to induce changes in the saliency of ethnicity.³⁴ It was therefore unsurprising that Latvian politics experienced a renewed spike in ethnicisation following the crisis, most evidence in the series of controversial language and constitutional referendums that were initiated by various political organisations. Although the crisis peaked in 2008-9, it was not until 2010 that the real ethnicisation started. In the run-up to the October 2010 general election, the nationalist party For Fatherland and Freedom/Latvian National Movement (later forming the National Alliance coalition [NA] with the other main nationalist party All for Latvia!) announced plans to instigate a nationwide referendum to outlaw Russian as a language of instruction in Latvia's publicly-funded schools.³⁵ Importantly, this successfully ensured the continued entrenchment of ethnicity as the most salient political cleavage in Latvian politics.

Harmony Centre had been gradually trying to reduce its image as an exclusively Slavic/Russian party by including more ethnically-Latvian names on its party lists and ensuring that its public representatives all spoke fluent Latvian.³⁶ Its main strategic response to the crisis had been to focus on concrete economic issues over ethnic ones, criticising the austerity reforms of

the incumbent government and highlighting the need for greater social guarantees.³⁷ For example, SC leader Nils Ušakovs noted how the economic crisis brought Latvians and Russians together as ‘all are suffering equally from economic problems’.³⁸ This strategy looked propitious after Ušakovs became the first ethnic Russian Riga Mayor in 2009 and SC was poised to become the largest *Saeima* party. Harmony Centre’s opponents feared that the economic consequences of the crisis might help it make gains among the ethnic Latvian electorate. In response, the National Alliance fell back on a familiar repertoire that forced SC to re-emphasise the interests of its (mainly Russian-speaking) electorate, thereby falling into the trap of increased ethnicisation. When Harmony Centre argued against the referendum initiative, nationalist parties inevitably found it easy to cast SC as pro-Russian and as ‘a hateful force towards Latvians’.³⁹

Ultimately, although the National Alliance did not succeed in gathering the required number of signatures for a nation-wide referendum (10 percent of the registered electorate), its actions reinforced ethnic boundaries.⁴⁰ Perhaps predictably, the failed attempt to initiate a referendum led to a counter-reaction by Russian minority organisations and representatives. The previously fringe extreme-leftist United Latvia and Native Language, for example, were able to galvanise support for a counter-referendum that would make constitutional changes to give Russian the status of the second state language of Latvia.⁴¹

SC had every good reason to reject a referendum initiative supported most prominently by individuals combining ultra-radical ethnic agendas and left-wing ideologies, particularly given its intention to appeal to the wider Latvian electorate and move beyond Latvia’s ethnicised cleavages. Indeed, reject is what it first did. However, in November 2011, the party reversed its stance and gave full support to the referendum.⁴²

Consequently, with SC’s backing, United Latvia and Native Language were successful in securing 187,378 signatures (from a required 154,379) in favour of staging a referendum. In the end, however, 75 percent opposed the introduction of Russian as a second language from a referendum turnout of 71 percent of eligible voters. For David Lublin, this whole episode ‘serves as an example of how pressure from more extreme parties can help polarize more

moderate ethnic parties and leaders, among both the majority and the minority.’⁴³

For Harmony Centre, the referendum clearly illustrated the ethnic dilemma it faced. Because prominent SC politicians eventually backed the language initiative, they reinforced ‘Latvian’ portrayals of their party as pro-Russian and anti-Latvian, diverting attention away from their economic programme of increased social spending. At the same time, as the referendum initiative gathered momentum, it simply became politically untenable for SC to ignore the demands of their predominantly Russian-speaking electorate. As the results of the referendum show, there was an almost exact match between ethnicity and either support or opposition to the Russian-language referendum.⁴⁴

Interestingly, the LSP’s strategic response to the referendum was generally one of neutrality, despite being part of the SC coalition. Party leader Rubiks stated that he would not participate in it and supported Latvia’s ‘status quo’.⁴⁵ Unlike the extreme left who championed the referendum, the LSP doggedly upholds the communist ideal of internationalism and makes a point of publishing materials in both Russian and Latvian.

In fact, this apparently virtuous stance is a symptom of the LSP’s deeper reluctance to make any meaningful strategic or intellectual changes to the party programme. The party’s official publication *Latvian Socialist* simply sidestepped the referendum issue completely.⁴⁶ However, Soviet internationalism did not preclude some deeply Russocentric, ethnicised strategies. For instance, the LSP remains fixated on the topic of the Red Army’s victory over Nazi Germany in the Second World War, one of the most divisive issues demarcating ethnic boundaries in contemporary Latvia.⁴⁷ The importance of the ‘Great Patriotic War’ (as it is termed in Russia) in maintaining the political legitimacy both of the USSR and Vladimir Putin’s post-Soviet Russia is widely acknowledged. For the LSP, reverence for the Soviet/Russian interpretations of the conflict also underpins its party legitimacy. For example, the December 2009 edition of *Latvian Socialist* reported that the LSP’s most important annual achievement was organising the annual gathering for veterans of the Great Patriotic War at Kurgan Druzhby (cemetery in Belarus).

The same issue also reproduced four resolutions from the LSP's Party Congress. Two ('No to anti-communism', 'In support of an objective history of the Second World War') focused exclusively on historical memory. The other two related to the ongoing economic crisis. These appeals emphasised 'Support for small and medium-sized employers', and that 'The government needs to take responsibility for the crisis and the catastrophic fall in Latvians' standard of living'. The latter included strong criticism of the right-wing government's austerity policies. It is noticeable, however, that this resolution lacked any concrete policy proposals.

Indeed, the LSP has made few detailed economic policies in response to the crisis. It has been rare for such issues to play a central role in its political strategy. The party has long argued that Latvia has undergone a far-reaching socio-economic crisis caused by 'anti-people' market reforms and corrupt elites in the context of imperialist globalisation.⁴⁸ The major means whereby the LSP conceptualised the latest crisis was to juxtapose Latvia's disastrous economic situation (high unemployment, shrinking manufacturing sector, critical outflow of labour to other EU countries) with the Soviet model (full employment, thriving manufacturing sector, inflow of skilled labour from the rest of the USSR).

Overall, the party's messages remain ritualistic, and framed in a familiar Soviet lexicon and aesthetics. Images in LSP publications, for example, depict Soviet statues, Red Army war veterans and pictures from the Second World War. This reflects a party that, like the Czech KSČM, has preferred to be the 'introverted' guardian of the Soviet sub-culture than fundamentally adapt to emerging challenges. It is true that the party has long called for mobilisation of left-wing parties, trade-unions and social-movements against the bourgeois government. Yet the LSP is utterly unable to further such mobilisation. After all, Latvia suffers from the general post-Soviet syndrome of weak social movements. In particular, trade unions are feeble and have few ties to political parties, let alone the left.⁴⁹ The LSP has admitted that its contacts with trade unions are feeble.⁵⁰ Moreover, it is an organisation less than 1000-strong, which struggles to increase its ranks or impose internal discipline.⁵¹ Indicatively, the reasons the youth organisation United Latvia gave for leaving the LSP in 2010 were political passivity and being a 'Rubiks fanclub.'⁵² The

cumulative image is of a nostalgic entity, unwilling and unable to break with the traditions of the 'Russian left'.

The Consequences of the 'Ethnic' Ukrainian Crisis

It is important to note that the recent development of RLPs in Latvia has also been shaped by external, geopolitical developments. Russia's annexation of the Crimean peninsula in 2014, for example, had direct implications for Latvian RLPs. President Putin justified Russia's actions in Crimea by citing the need to protect Russian speakers, and many were quick to highlight existing and potential parallels with the demographic and ethnic situation in Latvia.

Owing to Latvia's highly ethnicised political system, the 'ethnic crisis' had as significant effects on the left as the preceding economic one, forcing the 'Russian left' to decide how to react to the heightened sensitivities surrounding the geopolitical changes. We refer to the Ukrainian crisis as 'ethnic', not because this was its sole essence, but because it was largely perceived in ethnic terms within Latvia's political discourse. Consistent with the above, it is noticeable how the LSP has largely pursued a 'status quo' position, rarely mentioning this crisis, with the exception of lambasting the interference of US, EU and NATO imperialists in Ukraine's affairs in favour of 'nationalist' and 'fascistic' forces.⁵³

Consequently, this section focuses on the two other most significant 'Russian left' parties in Latvia, Harmony and the Latvian Russian Union (LKS), whose responses to the Ukrainian crisis have been more dynamic than the SPL's. The LKS evolved from the rump For Human Rights in United Latvia (PCTVL), the largest left-wing coalition in 1998-2002. PCTVL changed its name to the LKS in early 2014, which, we will argue, indicates noticeable ethnicisation and a departure from some of the core leftist values it had previously espoused. As detailed above, Harmony replaced PCTVL as the most electorally successful left party in Latvia, and remains the partner of choice for the LSP. Examining the political discourse of these two parties helps understand the ethnic pressures that continue to define Latvia's political party system and how parties respond. As such, this section analyses data from the respective websites and party programmes of Harmony and the LKS from February to May 2014.⁵⁴

Harmony's public discourses during the period in question continued its above-noted desire to transcend ethnicity, a trend evident since the start of the economic crisis. The majority of news articles examined focused on concrete policies unrelated to identity or ethnicity questions. For example, the party called for the reversal of austerity policies that had reduced spending on education and medicine, a policy which, Harmony argued, would stimulate the economy and increase Latvia's investment potential (Harmony, 19.02.14). The party also emphasised reducing the salience of ethnicity relative to economic prosperity. Consistent with its name, the party advocated inter-ethnic harmony, arguing that 'our home is Latvia, and inhabitants of this land need to be united ...ignoring questions of history, language and such like. Only under these conditions will Latvia become a "prosperous home"' (Harmony 10.05.14). Harmony's view of prosperity involved Latvia's advantageous investment potential as a bridge between Europe and Russia (Harmony, 18.03.14), thereby conceptualising the EU and Russia as solutions to, rather than the causes of, the economic crisis. Overall, Harmony's approach envisaged Latvians and Russians as equal participants in a globalised, socially-democratic Latvia, attracting investment from the EU and Russia alike.

However, events in Ukraine forced the party to set out its official position on the new crisis (Harmony 05.03.14). In this document, Harmony tried to avoid taking sides and listed nine points including supporting the 'unconditional territorial integrity of Ukraine', calling for 'immediate, constructive dialogue between the EU, Russia, and Ukraine', support for the rights of Ukraine's national and linguistic minorities, and repudiating efforts of 'certain Latvian politicians to escalate the situation in Latvia by using rhetoric aimed against representatives of national minorities'. Harmony avoided explicit references to Russophones in Ukraine and argued that Russia's actions there did not entail a threat to Latvia. It opposed the emergent EU/US sanctions regime against Russia.

However, Harmony's approach has reflected the tension between liberal and ethnic approaches in Latvia's 'militant democracy.'⁵⁵ Despite its 'neutral' stance, Harmony has continued to appeal to the aesthetics of memory among its predominantly Russian-speaking electorate. Victory Day (9 May) is an important symbolic date for many Russian speakers in Latvia as it marks

Victory of the Soviet Army over Nazi Germany in the Second World War.⁵⁶ Therefore, similarly to the LSP, Harmony employs the 'Great Patriotic War' as a legitimising discourse. For example, Harmony is actively involved in organising annual Victory Day celebrations in Riga.

At the same time, Harmony has attempted to de-ethnicise these celebrations. In 2014, the single website article devoted to the events was entitled 'Ušakovs asks for people to protect and love Latvia regardless of nationality' (Harmony 10.05.14). In this article the party refers to the sacred memory of the people who fought against Nazism, but the discourse is framed in terms of loyalty to Latvia: 'the children of the soldiers and veterans need to be worthy of their memory. They need to respect their state, Latvia, and trust in it.'

Ultimately, the Ukraine crisis seriously compromised Harmony's political neutrality. Russia's annexation of Crimea and ongoing armed conflict in south-east Ukraine were significant themes in the May 2014 European and October 2014 *Saeima* elections. Harmony suffered a significant setback in May, losing six percent of its vote and one of two EP seats, largely because of its unconvincing stance: '[h]ardline Russophones voted for [the LKS] and the populist Alternative party while moderates switched their vote to the governing Unity (*Vienotība*) party'.⁵⁷ Harmony's contortions were starkly visible. The day after the EP elections, its website (referring to the LKS), warned that 'Radical Russian forces will enter the next *Saeima*' (Harmony 26.05.14). However, only two days later, the website adopted a more radical, opposite view:

Ethnic Latvians are scared because they've started to think what they would do if they were in the position of ethnic Russians in [Latvia].

After twenty-five years of persecution and insult they would also have turned to 'radical leaders' or 'little green men' for help.⁵⁸ When there is a defender of the oppressed (he's called VVP [Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin]), they are scared that Russian Latvians will turn to him (Harmony 28.05.14).

Indeed, the 'Putin question' highlights Harmony's problem in balancing economic and ethnic issues. Harmony has long had a co-operation agreement

with United Russia (Putin's ruling party), and prior to the May election Ušakovs had announced in a TV interview in Moscow that Putin was the 'best possible' leader for Russia in the current climate. Harmony thereafter articulated a Janus-faced position of 'largely denouncing Russian actions to Latvian audiences while speaking in a more subtle and supportive tone to Russophone ones'.⁵⁹

The pressures to adopt a more ethnicised tone and increased competition for the Russophone vote from radicalised 'Russian' parties were most evident in the emergence of the Latvian Russian Union in early 2014. The LKS' predecessor, For Human Rights in United Latvia had always held Russophone rights central to its agenda, but had also articulated a left-leaning economic programme calling for higher social spending and greater state involvement in the economy.⁶⁰ For example, its (pre-crisis) 2006 programme prioritised economic goals above ethnic ones, with the issues of status of the Russian language and non-citizenship appearing merely as the ninth and tenth headings.⁶¹ Instead, the programme promised to raise social guarantees 'to the European level', increase pensions and wages to the real living minimum, to spend no less than 8 percent of GDP on the health service, and to stimulate growth in Latvia's export industries.

Following the economic crisis, PCTVL's strategic response was to emphasise its credentials as the party that supported the cultural and linguistic rights of Russian speakers. Its 2010 party programme pledged to turn Latvia into a 'Baltic Luxemburg' by facilitating multilingualism and using the Russian community as a unique economic resource to attract investments from the EU and Russia.⁶² Additionally, PCTVL started to refer to itself specifically as 'the party of the Russian community in Latvia' instead of a party generally supporting equal rights (as its name suggested).⁶³ The economic component of the PCTVL programme did not disappear, but became less visible, especially because Harmony Centre's overlapping social and economic messages were being articulated with more success, slicker marketing, and more dynamic (younger) personalities.

In contrast, the Latvian Russian Union (as befitted its name) demonstrated a much narrower scope of interests focused exclusively on ethnicised issues such as the protection of Russian schools (LKS 03.03.14),

celebration of Victory Day (LKS 16.03.14), calls for protests and pickets in support of Russia's actions in Crimea (LKS 10.03.14), diatribes against corrupt western values (LKS 12.03.14), and highlighting 'Russophobia' and 'anti-Russian' sentiments in the Baltic states (LKS 06.05.14). Policies beyond ethnic issues were largely ignored. Unsurprisingly, LKS's ethnic stance became almost entirely congruent with contemporary Russian state discourses, with emphasis on the historical-cultural, spiritual, and civilizational uniqueness of the Russian nation and its separateness from 'postmodern' Europe and 'fascistic' Latvia.⁶⁴ Russia's allegedly benevolent support for Russophone rights in Latvia were endorsed wholesale. On the question of Russia's annexation of Crimea, LKS (20.05.14) adopted an entirely pro-Russian position: 'the Russian army, as is natural, came to the defence of peaceful citizens and its co-citizens.'

Analysis of Harmony and the LKS's discourses at the time of turmoil in Ukraine is therefore very telling. Harmony highlights the duality of Latvia's ethnicised and liberal-republican approaches to democracy, caught between focussing on socio-economic arguments but periodically feeling forced to revert to discourses of ethnic discrimination. In contrast, LKS demonstrates how it has been possible to transition from a socio-economically leftist party to a radicalised ethnic one, as anti-elite ethnic populism increasingly subsumed its economic programme during the economic and Ukrainian crises. In most contexts LKS would now be categorised as a radical right-wing party. However, amidst the peculiarities of Latvian politics, it remains popularly perceived as a party of the radical left.

The electoral consequences of these processes have, as yet, been minimal. Harmony partially recovered from its May 2014 debacle, and despite losing votes in October 2014, maintained its position as Latvia's biggest Saeima party with twenty-four seats (previously thirty-one) (Table 11.1). Although LKS leader Ždanoka stayed an MEP in May and the party doubled its previous *Saeima* vote in October, the modest 1.6 percent gained remained far below the required five-percent *Saeima* threshold. This gives grounds to suggest that heavily ethnicised Russian discourses lack resonance with the majority of Latvia's Russian speakers, at least among the politically-enfranchised members. Of course, we may also expect that LKS discourses

might have more impact among non-voting, non-citizens who generally articulate more allegiance to Russia than Latvia.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, the analysis points to the continued salience of ethnicity within Latvian politics, demonstrating how the 'Russian left' has been unable to articulate coherent, de-ethnicised economic policies.

Conclusion

This chapter examined why RLPs in Latvia have been unable to mobilise popular support following the 2008 crisis. The crisis, brought acute economic decline and rising unemployment to Latvia and governments enacted austerity-based remedies. These could have boosted support for the radical left as in Greece, Spain and Portugal. Although the centre-left Harmony, with which the radical left Socialist Party is tied in long-term alliance, benefitted electorally in 2010-11, it failed to capitalise on this success, while the LSP's vote has stagnated.

We have argued that the major reason for the failure of the left and the radical left has been Latvia's post-Soviet ethnicised party system which results in the left being viewed as a Russophone 'fifth column' as it struggles to separate leftist socio-economic preferences from ethnic concerns. As a consequence of this, the left remains divided and partially disenfranchised. In large part this is a legacy of Soviet occupation, which means that concepts such as socialism and a strong welfare state are closely tied to the Soviet experience. Moreover, the Ukrainian 'ethnic crisis' reminded many that the Soviet-era relationship between defence of minority rights and Russification is not historically obsolescent and accelerated the ethnicisation of the left.

Might the left have broken away from this situation, for example by adopting more auspicious supply-side strategies? Certainly, the division of forces into three often-competing parliamentary parties has often divided the left's potential, albeit this division reflects real ideological divisions (social democratic, socialist and Russophile) among Latvia's Russophones. Moreover, the consequence of Latvia's ethnicisation leaves the left in a classic electoral bind: moving to the centre risks defection to more hard-line Russophile groups, while nourishing the Russophone electorate risks entrenching a 'Russian'

image antagonistic to many ethnic Latvians. The ethnic biases inherent in Latvia's political system have entailed limited room for manoeuvre.

Certainly, the strategies of the major left parties demonstrate this. Harmony's attempts to articulate a coherent, de-ethnicised social-democratic position and alternative models to Latvia's austerity programme have allowed it to become the dominant left player, eclipsing the more minority-focussed PCTVL and attracting some ethnic Latvians. Yet nationalist parties have been able to divert attention away from economic issues, forcing Harmony to re-emphasise its 'Russian' position on support for the Russian language, rights for Russian speakers, and the historical interpretation of the Second World War.

As the most prominent RLP in Latvia, the LSP continues to articulate an all-too-familiar agenda: the lexicon and aesthetics of Soviet Marxism-Leninism in all but name. Whereas its pragmatic alliances have allowed it a parliamentary niche, its subordinate position within these alliances has failed to nurture a sustainable, independent profile. Moreover, it has resisted substantive changes to its intellectual or strategic priorities, leaving it with a conservative communism that both fails to capture new audiences and immediately serves to ethnicise the party (and by extension Harmony), since for many in Latvia, Sovietisation equals Russification.

Finally, the Latvian Russian Union was originally a leftist minority-rights party, and remains a radical left party in Latvian parlance, but now represents a radical right ethnic Russian party whose strategy has increasingly been to ignore economic issues almost entirely.

In these contexts, it is little wonder that the radical left has been so ineffective and that Latvia's neo-liberal consensus has continued to dominate the political scene, despite the effects of a deep and socially devastating economic crisis.

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⁴ In 2014 it canvassed as LKS

⁵ Yoji Koyama, ‘Economic Crisis In The Baltic States: Focusing On Latvia’, *Economic Annals* 55, no. 186 (2010): 99.

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- ³² Ijabs, 'After the Referendum', 4.
- ³³ President Valdis Zatlers dissolved parliament following MPs' refusal to sanction the home search of prominent businessman and MP Ainārs Šlesers (Latvia's First Party/Latvian Way), following corruption charges.
- ³⁴ Francesco Caselli and W.J. Coleman, 'On the Theory of Ethnic Conflict', *Journal of the European Economic Association* 11 (2013): 166.

³⁵ Auers, 'An Electoral Tactic? Citizens' Initiatives in Post-Soviet Latvia', 62–64.

³⁶ Following election to the 10th *Saeima*, Harmony Centre deputy Valērijs Kravcovs became the centre of attention for his inability to speak Latvian. MPs from the National Alliance demanded that he be stripped of his parliamentary mandate and an investigation was launched into how he was able to obtain Latvian citizenship (which requires basic knowledge of Latvian). See http://www.tvnet.lv/zinas/latvija/427019-kravcovs_nolemis_kartot_valsts_valodas_prasmes_parbaudijumu (accessed 26 January 2016).

³⁷ Cheskin, *Russian Speakers in Post-Soviet Latvia*, chapter 7.

³⁸ As cited in Vija Sile and Ilze Dzalbe, 'The Financial Crisis and the Discourses of Latvia's Political Parties', *European Integration Studies*, no. 5 (2012): 105.

³⁹ Personal interview with Saeima deputy Jānis Dombrava (National Alliance), 14 March 2011. See also Ijabs, 'After the Referendum'.

⁴⁰ 120,433 signatures were gathered out of a necessary 153,232. Šūpule, I., 'The Construction of National and Ethnic Identity in Online Discussions on Referenda Initiatives in Latvia', *Baltic Journal of European Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011): 124.

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⁴² David Lublin, 'The 2012 Latvia Language Referendum', *Electoral Studies* 32, no. 2 (2013): 386.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 387.

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⁵³ E.g. LSP, 'Otchetnyi Doklad Pravleniya Sotsialisticheskoi Partii Latvii Na XIX S"ezde'.

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⁵⁶ Ammon Cheskin, 'History, Conflicting Collective Memories, and National Identities: How Latvia's Russian-Speakers Are Learning to Remember', *Nationalities Papers* 40, no. 4 (2012): 561–84.

⁵⁷ Daunis Auers, 'The October 4th 2014 Parliamentary Election in Latvia', *EPERN*, 28 October 2014, <https://epern.wordpress.com/2014/10/28/the-october-4th-2014-parliamentary-election-in-latvia/>.

⁵⁸ This was the ironic name given to the armed soldiers who appeared without insignia in the Crimean peninsula before the region was incorporated into the Russian Federation. The Kremlin had maintained that these were local militias, but Putin later admitted to the presence of Russian troops operating in Crimea.

⁵⁹ Auers, 'The October 4th 2014 Parliamentary Election in Latvia'.

⁶⁰ Artis Pabriks and Aiga Štokenberga, 'Political Parties and the Party System in Latvia', in *Post-Communist EU Member States: Parties and Party Systems*, ed. Susanne Jungerstam-Mulders (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 57.

⁶¹ ‘PROGRAMMA Ob"edineniya Politicheskikh Organizatsii “Za Prava Cheloveka v Edinoi Latvii” Na Vyborakh 9-Go Seima’, *LKS Web Page*, 2006,

http://zapchel.lv/index.php?lang=ru&mode=party&submode=program&page_id=3989.

⁶² ‘Programma ZaPChEL Na Vyborakh 10-Go Seima’, *LKS Web Page*, 2010,

http://zapchel.lv/index.php?lang=ru&mode=party&submode=program&page_id=10629.

⁶³ ‘Programma ZaPChEL Na Vyborakh Rizhskoi Dumy 2009 G.’, *LKS Web Page*, 2009,

http://zapchel.lv/index.php?lang=ru&mode=party&submode=program&page_id=10628.

⁶⁴ Cheskin, *Russian Speakers in Post-Soviet Latvia*.

⁶⁵ Market and public opinion research centre, ‘Piederības Sajūta Latvijai: Mazākumtautību Latvijas Iedzīvotāju Aptauja [Feeling of Belonging to Latvia: A Survey of Latvia’s Inhabitants]’, June 2014,

http://www.mk.gov.lv/sites/default/files/editor/atskaite_piederiba_08_2014.pdf.